

Love, Discipline and Discipleship 2 Corinthians 2:6-11; Matthew 18:15-18

Today, we will be baptizing about a dozen of our LAC family. In baptism, those who are baptized declare 1) when they go under the water, that they are buried with Christ, their sins are washed away with their old self-directed lives being dead and 2) when they come up out of the water, that they are risen to live a new life with Jesus as their Savior and Lord.

As I say almost weekly, that new life in Christ does not become wholly new in a moment. No, it is a process of growth we call discipleship. Simply put, every one of us has been made in God's image. That means that there are things about us meant to reflect the very ways of God. But, ever since sin entered the world, all of us "fall short of that glory of God" (**Rom 3:23**). There are things about all of us that are not what God created them to be. To put it bluntly, we all have sinned. But, God loves us even while we are sinners and has found a way to forgive our sins and begin to remake us to be what he created us to be.

One of the central issues of the New Testament is how will we are to grow to become more and more like Christ. And, the Bible teaches that our growth in Christ is to happen within a church family. We are to grow together until each one of us is, as **Col 1:28** says, "complete in Christ."

Let me show you how central we see your growth in Christ is to the reason for our existence as a church:

- "Our Mission: Following Jesus, we participate in God's reconciling work by making disciples of all peoples and generations."
- "Our Vision: Presenting each one complete in Christ."

That is to say that, if you become a part of LAC, our commitment to you is that we will seek to be a church family in which you will become complete in Christ. And, we ask you to make the same commitment to us all – that you will be involved in the lives of LAC people until each one of us becomes complete in Christ.

My message today is that **one of the most important means God has instituted so that each of us actually will grow to become complete in Christ is what church people have called church discipline.** For many people, that term, "church discipline", is distasteful and off-putting. But, today, I want us all to see how important, and even beautiful, church discipline is when it is understood as being a part of God's mission to make all things right in our lives and in our world.

Love, Discipline, and Discipleship in the 1st Church of Corinth (2 Cor 2:5-11)

The passage we come to today takes us to the culmination of an act of church discipline in the 1st Church of Corinth. Notice the moving words in **2:6-7**: "*The sanctions inflicted on him (i.e., a man whose sin had brought grief to all the people in that church) by the majority is sufficient. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.*"

That kind of statement should be the goal of any kind of discipline that happens in any local church. Isn't it moving to read? But, let me tell you – it was quite a journey to get to that end-goal. Let's see how it happened. As I read through Paul's letters to this church in Corinth, I've put together this case study:

Paul had founded the Church in Corinth during his missionary travels. (See Acts 18). <http://2.bp.blogspot.com/>

qyG6mDQ10pg/T98qbXN-osI/AAAAAAAAHHQ/9Oiu5DP2QaY/s1600/DSC06311.JPG He not only founded but he had also faithfully pastored the new Christians in Corinth for 18 months. After finishing his work there, he returned to his missionary ministry but got wind of Christians in Corinth hanging out with other Christians who were behaving in sexually immoral ways. So, Paul wrote a letter to them, one that he referred to in **1 Cor 5:9**, a letter that probably has been lost. In that letter, he called the church people to live lives of sexual purity.

In spite of that letter, Paul continued to hear of ongoing problems in the church including a situation reported in 1 Cor 5 of incestuous sexual immorality that was offensive not only to Paul but also to unbelievers in Corinth. Note this: the city of Corinth was the Las Vegas of its day, i.e., a city known for and even proud of its sexual freedom. So, if the people in Corinth were scandalized by the incident in the church, then it was indeed serious. But, the church didn't seem to want to confront the man and to call him to repentance. My guess is that he was a part of a prominent and probably affluent family in the church. Paul wrote that they were proud to have this man in their church.

Listen to his words: “*There is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father’s wife. And you are proud! You should rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this* (1 Cor 5:1-2).”

But, they didn’t do it. In fact, my guess, when I read the whole of 2 Corinthians, is that this man and his family started an uprising against the Apostle Paul and his leadership because Paul asked the church to discipline him. So, Paul made a visit to the church, one that he called a “painful visit” (2:1) and afterward wrote another letter to them that he admitted was severe. And, at last, they had confronted the man and called him to repentance. Apparently, he had repented. The church had administered some kind of discipline – to which the man had responded. By the time we get to 2 Cor 2:6-11, Paul said that the time for forgiveness and restoration had come. I love the three phrases: “*forgive him*”, “*comfort him*”, and “*reaffirm your love for him*” (2:7-8).

With that example -- as well as with Mt 18:15-18 and Gal 6:1-4 that we read earlier -- in your minds, let me summarize a few truths that I think are important for us as a church family at LAC about church discipline:

1. The Goal Must be Clear: Loving Restoration to God’s Family and Renewed Growth in Christ

One thing that should permeate the culture of our church is the vision statement I showed you earlier, i.e., that we want each one of us to become complete in Christ. For this to happen, I’m convinced that all of us need to think about our church relationships as “discipling relationships.” By that, I mean that we should always be seeking to help one another grow in our walks with Jesus. You see, we can influence one another’s spiritual lives not only in that battles we all have against sin but also in our encouragement of each other, teaching one another, praying with one another and sharing one another’s burdens.

In short, genuine disciples of Jesus should, in their church involvement, be involved in one another’s lives in ways that help each one of us to grow spiritually. Because of that, when, in Mt 18:15, Jesus spoke of believers going personally to fellow believers to call them away from sin, he was referring to something that should not be unusual in church. No, this should happen in many ways in a church family – even when the sin isn’t as serious as what happened in Corinth. What I’m saying is that our Christian friendships and small group gatherings should constantly be settings of what Proverbs calls “iron sharpening of iron.”

In churches that have embraced the fact that we should all be helping one another to grow in Christ, church discipline goes on all the time in helpful, informal, everyday ways. When that happens, then when the more formal processes of church discipline become necessary, they are much less likely to be ignored altogether or to be carried out too harshly. Why? – because the church will already have a positive way of looking at our relationships in church, i.e., that following Jesus requires correction, prayer, and obedience to God’s Word.

So, when a person in church walks away from the Lord or gives evidence of ungodly behavior, it should be a normal part of church life that church friends or your entire small group would say, “There is something in your life we need to talk to you about” and then call you back to the Lord’s way.

So, the goal of church discipline is never punitive. As Gal 6:1 states so clearly, “*Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently.*” What we see in 2 Cor 2:5-11 is an example of that happening.

2. The Importance Must be Acknowledged: God’s Glory and Our Growth

In my estimation, the main negative effect of ignoring church discipline is it defames God’s name when we ignore sin or when we act ungraciously to one who has sinned. When the world sees us ignoring sins or dealing harshly with one another, the world will look at us and say, “Their so-called God can’t change anything!”

But, almost as serious as that is how ignoring sinful ways in a church harms everyone in the church. That’s what Paul was getting at in 2 Cor 2:5: *If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you to some extent.*

John Donne wrote, “No man is an island. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” That is true of all humanity. But, in a church, it is more directly the case because we are in one family with one Father. Like a biological family, in our church family, it is impossible for there to be unfaithfulness, deception, or strife between any two individuals that does not begin to spread and touch others as well. I have been in churches where feuds had developed years before – and, years later, one group of people would still not speak to another.

As a result of that, the whole church had been paralyzed spiritually; and the church's impact had ground to a halt. And, of course, the person involved in sin just continues down that sinful path.

All this is to say that the practice of us knowing one another and loving each other well enough that we keep turning one another away from sin and back to God is – well, it's central to what a church should be.

3. The Difficulty Must Be Anticipated: Other Kingdoms Will Fight It

When you read about how it was for them in Corinth and how long it took for them to deal with one man, then you should be able to appreciate why effective church discipline has always been hard for every church. I mean, we don't even have an Apostle around to help us! What makes it so hard? I think of a few things:

- Our own weakness – We think, “Who am I to speak a word of correction to someone else? What if he says, “You're worse than I am.” Well, let's own the fact that we all will need correction in our lives. But, that fact should not take away our love for that other person. We have to love enough to say, “I really love you – but I think that what you are doing is harming your life with God...”
- Our tendency to think, “Let someone else do it.” Our busy-ness that says, “I have too many other things to do so I hope he self-corrects.”
- The challenge of acting with both law and grace; both justice and love. If we're too harsh, people will say, “Where is grace in this church?” If we're too lenient or if we ignore the problem, they will say, “This church doesn't care about holiness.”

And, of course, our own anger about what another person in the church has done may keep us from wanting to engage in church discipline in the way the Bible calls us to it. Paul says in **2 Cor 2:11** that even Satan plots so that a person's repentance and restoration to fellowship in church will not happen.

I will simply say now that those kinds of challenges are formidable – but they should not keep us from stepping into a person's life out of love and calling him or her to return to godliness. Scripture calls us to do so – and, when we do, to trust God's Spirit to lead us to whatever next step we should take.

It was hard in Corinth. But, what we read about in our text today is how beautiful the ending of a long journey in biblically-directed church discipline can be. And, if we engage in it with the love of Christ in our hearts and the Spirit of God guiding, we will see the same kind of beautiful restoration times here at LAC too.

4. The Biblical Process Must Be Followed: Faithful confrontation – until forgiveness is offered and received and Satan is thwarted.

I'm not going to give you a lecture about the process a church should take when a public sinful matter rises to the level that the one in Corinth did. Let me tell you simply how any correction process must begin and end.

The first step, as both Jesus and Paul clearly indicate, is to begin with a faithful personal confrontation. Jesus said, “*If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you (Mt 18:15a).* More often than not, that is enough. Now, you may not be aware of it -- because this kind of thing is not publicized -- but that is happening all the time in this congregation. Then, if a one-to one visit doesn't work, keep the matter as small as you can. Take a trusted Christian friend with you – then perhaps your small group (if you have one). Usually, as Jesus went on to say, what should happen, happens, i.e., “*If they listen to you, you have won them back (Mt 18:15b).*”

Note this for sure: We are not to go to one another about those matters where we merely feel irritated that someone is doing something in a different way than we would do it. We are to go only in those areas the Word of God has already said are clearly wrong. And, don't go quickly to your Ministry Council of your pastors and ask them to exert their authority. The time for that may come – but it will be only after all other steps have been taken. The objective of discipline is not to win an argument or to inflict punishment, but the ultimate restoration of a brother or sister in Christ.

The ending of a discipline process is as important as the beginning: True believers are to be ready – even anxious -- to forgive when the one who did wrong confesses that what he did was wrong. I've found that true repentance is always accompanied by sorrow, i.e., by owning up to the hurt that the sin caused. When that happens, true Jesus-followers who have received personally the forgiveness of Christ must be ready to instantly forgive such a one.

Paul spoke in our passage today of forgiving, comforting and reaffirming our love for the one who seeks forgiveness. Doing that usually leads to a process of restoring the individual to full participation in the church, a process led by the spiritual leadership of a church.

Let me leave you with a few personal and pastoral words. You need to have close Christian friends – or a godly and grace-filled small group in church – so that you can be involved in this kind of “iron sharpening iron” way of becoming complete in Christ. I’m not talking about Christian friends who don’t care how you live or who live in ways just like the world lives. I’m talking about Christian friends who want to grow in their faith. Then, be willing to speak into their lives when you see things that are not Christlike. Say, I love you. You know that, don’t you? So, I’ve got to tell you about what I’m seeing in your life...”

And, be open to your friends speaking into your life too. Don’t be defensive. Receive their words and counsel. If you do, we will all see happening what Paul said should happen in a Christian’s life, i.e., we will all “make progress in life and doctrine” (1 Tim 4:15-16) until each of us is complete in Christ and we live --

To God’s glory.